



16 MAY, 2026

Wild and alone, above the clouds

Newcastle Herald, Newcastle

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LUCY ARUNDELL hugs giant trees and embraces the rain in a hidden corner of Vancouver Island.

I'M standing on an unnamed glacier, on top of an unnamed mountain on Canada's west coast. Peaks pierce the horizon in all directions, forests running down their sides into steep glacial valleys, and rivers of solid turquoise flowing through the range, down into the sea.

We're high above the cloud bank, gazing out at the scenery, and not a single human sound reaches our ears except for our own breathing.

A helicopter has delivered us here, for a short sojourn on the ice during a 90-minute tour. Taking off from Campbell River, it has flown us high above Vancouver Island's infinite coast, soaring over dozens of islands to the mainland's Coast Mountains, close to the highest peak in British Columbia. Our pilot tells us we'll see hundreds of glaciers, in a range so inaccessible many of the peaks don't have names.

One of our group spots a grizzly bear, as small as an ant below us, hunting for salmon in one of the many rivers. Looking out the helicopter windows, it feels more like an IMAX movie than real life.

It's the start of a wild adventure on the north of Vancouver Island, one of the least-visited parts of Canada's west coast brimming with natural treasures.

To begin it, we'd flown for less than an hour from Vancouver into Campbell River perched on the east coast of Vancouver Island, on the mouth of a river overlooking part of the Inside Passage, where cruise ships pass daily on their way to Alaska.

The town of 35,000 people is renowned for its salmon fishing. If you ask a local they'll tell you it's the salmon fishing capital of the world; unfortunately, Ketchikan in Alaska,

about a thousand clicks north, claims the same title. But Campbell River still attracts fishermen from all over the world. On the plane in, we meet two of them on a two-week fishing holiday, and hear of their adventures involving salmon and bears.

Heading further north, we drive through endless forests to the end of the Island Highway at Port Hardy, the island's northernmost town. A proud sign at its centre announces that the community's economy depends on logging, mining and fishing. But according to local First Nations carver Calvin Hunt, whose totem poles stand tall in places as far afield as Mexico City and Singapore, tourism is beginning to replace the old industries.

The copper mine shut in the 1990s, the bay is no longer packed with fishing boats, the logging margins have shrunk with high transport costs, but the tourists are slowly trickling into the sleepy hamlet.

Walking in ancient forests

From Port Hardy, a two-hour drive on extremely bumpy, gravel roads

gets us to the car park for San Josef Bay, a remote beach on the island's north-western coast.

It's pouring with rain. Like, cats and dogs rain. We race out of the van and huddle under a picnic

shelter as June from Cove Adventure Tours hands out bright orange ponchos that make me feel like a fluorescent MnM.

The 2.6-kilometre



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walk through rain-forest feels like I've wandered into *Avatar*. Red, coral-like mushrooms sprout from tree roots; thick moss hangs from branches, and the trees twist and turn together like lovers forever entwined. We stumble out into a vast bay as the rain finally clears. Waves are rolling onto the beach and seastacks packed with trees are dotted across the sand. Brave surfers swim out to the wave breaks as their friends cheer them on from the shore, and wood smoke from a campfire wafts along the beach. We explore tidal caves, then sit up on rocks overlooking the bay for lunch, heating up soup on a gas stove.

The drive back to Port Hardy is filled with tales of failed settlements and abandoned army bases, shared by Jon, our driver. We drive through a company town of loggers, and hills reduced to stumps, emblems of the ongoing tug-of-war between conservation and local jobs. Jon promises us a secret as he turns off the main road into a small, overgrown lane and herds us into a clearing. Here stands a giant Sitka spruce tree, more than 67 metres tall and 1000 years old. The trunk is so wide I feel like a doll, the tree more than 4.2 metres in diameter. "Bruce the spruce," Jon tells us proudly. Hardly anyone knows it's here, and that's the way locals want to keep it.

We arrive back at our accommodation, Kwa'lilas Hotel, to more rain, and I steam in a hot bath before walking down to dinner near the jetty. As the sun sets, the sky above the sea is painted in pink and purple, and the tide pools reflect the colours like small mirrors. Thick fog rolls down from the other side of the bay across the water, and the little town begins to melt into the cloud.

Singing in the rain

On our last day on the island, the rain has settled in for good. It rains during my morning run, it rains during breakfast, and it rains as we pull on heavy red jackets and raincoats at Coastal Rainforest Safaris, ready for a wildlife watching tour.

Thick grey clouds sit heavy in the sky, and the rain doesn't draw breath all day. Nevertheless, we crowd into an open boat for a "coastal safari", dressed in heavy jackets and boots. We haven't even left the harbour when the captain slows the boat down and points out a sea otter playing in

kelp. Moored boats bob gently around the otter, but he doesn't seem at all concerned, twisting and spinning in the kelp.

We speed out across the ocean, the water as still as a bathtub and the rain pelting our faces. I'm grateful for the goggles and toque (Canadian word for beanie) and am trying to adjust the former when someone shouts, whale! A smooth black dorsal fin emerges, our first humpback of the day.

On the flight back to Vancouver, we fly over countless islands. There are only a few travellers on the plane, a tiny tin can with wings not much bigger than a bus. Maybe that's why northern Vancouver Island has stayed a secret for so long.

The writer was a guest of Destination British Columbia.



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TRIP NOTES

Explore verdict: A piece of Canada's rich, diverse wilderness which, being on the doorstep of Vancouver, is ripe for discovery by adventurous Australians.

Getting there: Fly from Vancouver to Campbell River or Nanaimo, or take the ferry from the Horseshoe Bay just north of Vancouver to Departure Bay in Nanaimo.

Where to stay: The Naturally Pacific Resort in Campbell River has high-season rooms from about \$C399 (\$404) a night. Rooms at Kwa'ilas Hotel in Port Hardy start at about \$C206. [naturallypacific.ca](#); [kwalilashotel.ca](#)

See and do: 49 North Helicopters West Coast Glacier Tour is \$C770 per person. Coastal Rainforest Safari Sea Otter and Whale Watching Tour is \$C360pp. [49northhelicopters.com](#); [coastalrainforestsafaris.com](#)

Explore more: [vancouverislandnorth.ca](#)

OFF THE BEATEN TRACK CANADA





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From top: Atop an unnamed glacier; Port Hardy otters; the writer meets Bruce the Spruce. Pictures by Getty Images; Lucy Arundell